

COCKROACH

甲由



HO KA KEI
(JEFF HO)

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甲由

Also by Ho Ka Kei
(Jeff Ho)

*Iphigenia and the Furies (On Taurian Land) & Antigone: 方
trace*

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For Pierre.

foreword

Hanna Kiel

Before I had the pleasure of meeting Jeff, I had the opportunity to delve into his remarkable play *cockroach* (甲由). The invitation to collaborate as a choreographer for this captivating production opened up a world of fascination for me. As a Korean Canadian artist I was immediately drawn to Jeff's storytelling and his portrayal of the intricate character at the core of this narrative. Remarkably, our initial encounter took place via Zoom, yet, even through the digital realm, I could sense the warmth of his generosity and his openness.

cockroach (甲由) marked my inaugural venture as a contemporary choreographer, and I found an instant connection with Jeff's unique approach to storytelling. His writing in this play transcends the mere exploration of a boy's trauma; it delves into the profound notion that our entire lives can be entangled with a singular event. It's a journey of retrospection and the process of learning to coexist with an indescribable painbody.

What struck me most about Jeff's work is the way he crafted this play. It is a narrative battleground where two languages and cultures clash and intertwine. Through a blend of humour and anger, direct and indirect approaches, concealment and revelation, Jeff masterfully navigates the complex themes of immigrant life, queer experiences, racism, and the quest for identity. The question of how to talk about these subjects looms large: Is there an appropriate way to speak of these things, or does such a way even exist? It's within the play's dialogues that we find the clues and answers that guide us through the odyssey of this painbody. The language within the play has a way of deceiving,

unsettling, confronting, and entertaining, leading us to an eventual reckoning with the boy at the centre of it all.

What I cherish most about *cockroach* (甲由) is that it propels us on an unpredictable journey. It's a ride that we can't control or predict, and we're left uncertain about the final destination, which adds to the intrigue.

My collaboration with Jeff on his brilliant play, and our exploration of the depths of painbody memories, has left an indelible mark on me. I've emerged from this experience as a transformed artist. *cockroach* (甲由) has been a profound catalyst in reshaping my creative path, and for that, I'm profoundly grateful.

Dora Mavor Moore Award-winner Hanna Kiel is from Seoul, South Korea, and moved to Vancouver, Canada, in 1996. She has presented her work at 12 Minutes Max, PlanB Singles and Solos Festival, and the Dancing on the Edge Festival in Vancouver. In 2007, she collaborated with Yoko Ono as a dancer and choreographer at the Centre A. Moving to Toronto in 2008, Hanna has continued choreographing for Rosedale Heights School of the Arts, Conteur Dance Academy, George Brown Dance, Ryerson Dances, School of Toronto Dance Theatre, ProArteDanza, Jörgen Dance, the National Ballet of Canada, Canadian Contemporary Dance Theatre, Toronto Dance Theatre, Dusk Dances, Tarragon Theatre, Silk Bath Collective, and Decidedly Jazz Danceworks in Calgary. In 2012 she won Northwest Dance Project's Pretty Creatives international choreographic competition, and she was an e-choreographer in 2015 for Springboard Danse Montreal. Hanna is the artistic director of Human Body Expression Dance Company.

foreword

Mike Payette

What is particularly inspiring about new creation in Canada is the capacity to layer in the intersections of cultural identity that make this land mutually vibrant and unique. The storytellers and caretakers that have protected our collective opportunity to find freedom in this country—therefore adding to the breadth of how individual stories can be shared—offer powerful bridges for those of us who have been brought here or have found a comfort in being able to thrive.

When I was appointed as Tarragon’s artistic director in 2021, we sought to expand our focus on what it means to be a playwright, and what it means to be Canadian today. In this investigation, the tie back continues to swim toward the notion of “intersectionality”; yes, from a cultural perspective, but also from how those dynamics lend themselves to artistic form and the range in which unique experiences can reach universal and heightened theatricality.

Jeff Ho’s text is enrobed with the very collisions that represent so many that have called this country home. His connectivity to language assimilation and the pursuit of individuality balanced by the throes of otherdom within a once-connected homeland of Hong Kong vibrates off the page. His skill in marrying prose and profound imagery is supported by the simplicity of one boy navigating a traumatic event that humanizes him beyond the complexities of “who am I” and reminds us of the many vulnerabilities so many occupy. One can simply ride the wave reading *cockroach* (甲由) and feel inspired, gutted, isolated, and hopeful all in the same held breath.

The world we created in our production was responsive to Jeff's ask of the text, as if he himself was embodying the Bard, desiring us to listen to it, respect it, and to be free to interpret it. Like the classical musician he is, Jeff expertly allows us to lean into the text's musicality—and like any rich text—imagine the theatrical backdrop these three souls cohabitate. Working with celebrated choreographer Hanna Kiel, we built a framework that engaged the body in this heightened world, shining light on the image when the spoken word wasn't enough. In this case, surely the text defines this world, and the body offers a synchronistic language that elevates the inherent danger of this tale.

This connection to danger is the undertone of *cockroach* (甲由). It rumbles through the pages and in the conditions from which Jeff is inspired—the danger of being from a land that is consciously othering, or the danger of seeking refuge in unknown territory amalgamated with the perils of coming-of-age and the crossroads of learning how to acclimate to new surroundings and new personal discoveries. Certainly, the act of living is a war in and of itself (not unlike riding the streetcars of the TTC) and *cockroach* (甲由) is Jeff's sword.

Jeff's mastery in evoking conflict in humanity is deeply rewarded by urging us to see ourselves in the Cockroach, the Bard, and altogether the Boy's journey, and with him take a moment to envision a lifted horizon.

A question lingers as the Boy's snapshot reliving unravels: Will he make it? The pursuit of going through the trenches of this cataclysmic moment is ultimately to survive, not to remedy. Through the Boy's multiplicities, he uncovers a new language that is unique to his ability to take one step beyond the trauma. To breathe into the chaos and grow from it. As audience members we inhale with Cockroach's first toke of catnip and collectively exhale with the invitation for the Boy to dream.

I believe he does.

Mike Payette is a director, educator, and actor who has appeared at some of Canada's finest theatres. He has worked with incredible companies across the country including the Citadel, Vertigo, Banff Centre, Geordie, Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland, Repercussion Theatre, Segal Centre, Centaur, the Grand, Factory Theatre, Neptune, and the National Arts Centre, among others. Directing

credits include Come Home: The Legend of Daddy Hall, cockroach (甲由), Paint Me This House of Love (Tarragon), Blithe Spirit (Shaw Festival), Choir Boy (Canadian Stage/Arts Club Theatre), Harlem Duet (Black Theatre Workshop), Another Home Invasion (Tableau D'Hôte Theatre), Hosanna and Choir Boy (Centaur), Around the World in 80 Days, Virginia Wolf, The Paperbag Princess, and Reaching for Starlight (Geordie), Venus, Burning Vision, and Indecent (National Theatre School), Sensitivity (Obsidian Theatre/CBC Gem), the Quebec premiere of Héritage—A Raisin in the Sun (Théâtre Duceppe), along with the national tours of The Tashme Project (Tashme Prod/Centaur/Factory/Firehall), and Lorena Gale's Angélique (BTW/Tableau D'Hôte/NAC/Factory/Obsidian). Mike is a two-time Montreal English Theatre Award (META) recipient and was the co-founding artistic director of Tableau D'Hôte Theatre and past assistant artistic director for Black Theatre Workshop. He was also artistic and executive director of Geordie Productions in Montreal before becoming artistic director of Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, where he is currently based.

cockroach (甲白) was first produced by Tarragon Theatre in their Mainspace, Toronto, from September 13 to October 9, 2022, with the following cast and creative team:

Bard: Karl Ang

Cockroach: 郝邦宇 Steven Hao

Boy: Anton Ling

Director: Mike Payette

Choreographer: Hanna Kiel

Set and Costume Design: Christine Ting-Huan 挺歡 Urquhart

Lighting Design: Arun Srinivasan

Sound Design and Original Score: Deanna H. Choi

Associate Director: Damon Bradley Jang

Production Dramaturgy: Myekah Payne

Assistant Sound Design: River Cecil Oliveira

Sound Design Intern: Tristan Chung

Stage Manager: Emilie Aubin

Apprentice Stage Manager: Jaimee Q. Vicente-Hall

characters

Cockroach

Bard

Boy

notes

Chapter 1: “Ooo Sac” is pronounced “ouuu” like in “you.”

Chapter 2: The GASPS are to be spoken out loud.
The brb’s wtf’s lol’s . . . each letter must be spoken out loud.

punctuation notes

A forward slash (/) is an interruption

A *beat* is a one count of silence

A *pause* is a three-to-five count of silence

When there are punctuation marks, they indicate a sense of music.

When there are a lack of punctuation marks, it indicates a legato drive through the line.

casting notes

When casting for this play, please take diligence and care in reflecting the conversations around Hong Kong politics, Queer Chinese identity, and trauma within your own communities. Cockroach and the Boy ideally should be Cantonese speakers (Mandarin is okay for the cockroach), while the Bard may be cast from IBPOC communities that reflect or neighbour the themes of this play.

chapter 1—intrusion

*Something so horrific,
A passing,
A disaster,
An assault,
Is happening.
In moments of horror
We search for a word,
A distance,
A role to play,
To withstand the bleak.*

*We see a boy.
He seems to be muttering something
Over and over again.*

BOY

(under his breath) Be to be to be to be to be to be to be to be to
Be to be to be to be to be to be to be to be to be to

*Trauma forces people to splinter
Apart from themselves,
Doesn't it?*

*We see one of these splinters (the BARD) hover above the boy
But they do not speak.*

*We see another splinter,
COCKROACH,
Crawl from some abyss,
Down down down, coming up.*

It takes time to even feel that you've splintered, doesn't it?

*Sometimes, these splinters speak on our behalf,
They must speak on our behalf,
And so
COCKROACH joins in.*

BOY

(under his breath) Be to be to be to be to be to be to be to be to be to
Be to be to be to be to be to be to be to be to be to

COCKROACH

(simultaneously with the BOY) To be to be to be to be to be to be to be
to be to be
To be to be to be to be to be to be to be to be to be

*COCKROACH intrudes,
Takes over.*

*The BOY and the BARD
Do not disappear,
But they seem to fade in some way.*

*COCKROACH gets up on stage.
It's gotta be magic, but also not,
Cuz that's just how roaches are anyway.*

*They look out at the audience,
Gauge the room,
Light up a joint.*

COCKROACH

To be

To be

To be

Beat.

A cockroach smoking a roach,
Can you imagine that?

Well that's what I am,
Whatchu gonna do 'bout it?

Ain't smoking weed though, that shit's legal now,
But hella expensive.

I'm smoking catnip.
Watchu gonna do 'bout that?

Catnip ain't just for cats.
Unlike those feline failures,
You won't see me rolling around,
Whiskers ablaze,
Meowing like some fur zombie.

Catnip just makes me chill.
And I need some chill right now.

Here, want some?

*COCKROACH offers a hit of catnip to the audience.
Someone in the audience may cough,
As they always do when there's a fog machine
Or any semblance of smoke or impurity in the air.*

(if someone coughs) Watchu coughing about?

The catnip smoke burning your

Homo sapien lungs?

Truss me,

That ain't the only thing that's gonna give you a cough.

(if no one coughs, COCKROACH will) Oh my oh my,

That shit hits hard.

Oof, my li'l roach lungs can't compare to you

Humans.

But truss.

I'll give you something to cough about one way or another.

I eat your food,

I eat your skin,

Sometimes I gnaw on your eyebrows,

Eyelashes,

Dandruff,

Nails,

What have you.

Nutritious? Maybe not,

But sure as hell tasty.

But don't worry,

I won't bite.

Promise.

I feel like we got off to a wrong start,

Gotta introduce, that's how y'all humans do it, yea?

Gotta introduce myself to each and every one of you.

COCKROACH steps on the blunt of catnip.

It sizzles and fades.

When Mike Payette assumed artistic directorship of Tarragon, I was grateful he programmed *cockroach* as part of his first season, and we continued development with collaborators and vital support from Hanna Kiel, Richard Lee, Jeff Yung, Justin Eddy, Myekah Payne, Justin Miller, and Andrea Vagianos.

Then the production, and it was all a dream, everyone on that production team and Tarragon Theatre: Steven, Karl, Anton, Christine, Deanna, Hanna, Mike, Arun, Damon, Myekah, River, Tristan, Emilie, and Jaimee, thank you.

This play took time, and it cost in a way that was very special and, at times, very hard. I am grateful for Pierre for being with me every step of the way. Gratitude to Ian Arnold for seeing this through. Grateful for Brian Quirt, Nina Lee Aquino, and David Yee for endless mentorship. Grateful for Joanna Falck for the faith and her wisdom. Grateful for the Tarragon playwriting community for COVID Zooms. Grateful for organizations who supported with resources and belief: the OAC, TAC, Wuchien Michael Than Fund, the Bulmash-Siegel Foundation, Repercussion, Tarragon, and Playwrights' Workshop Montréal. Thank you to Annie Gibson, Blake Sproule, Avvai Ketheeswaran, Brandon Crone, and Playwrights Canada Press for a beautiful partnership in publication.

I am grateful for audiences at the theatre, and for readers of plays, who gasp, laugh, cry, or sit in confusion, or take naps. You make plays an exciting thing to make, and none of this is possible without you. Thank you.



Jeff Ho (Ho Ka Kei) is a theatre artist, originally from Hong Kong. As an actor, he has toured as Ophelia in Why Not Theatre's *Prince Hamlet* across Canada and the US for over five years. As a playwright, his works include *cockroach* (甲由), *Iphigenia and the Furies (On Taurian Land)*, *Antigone: 方*, and *trace*. Jeff is a recipient of the Lambda Literary Award for LGBTQ+ Drama, the Toronto Theatre Critics' Award for Best New Canadian Play, the Jon Kaplan Legacy Fund Award, has been a finalist for the Playwright's Guild of Canada Drama Award and the Governor General's Literary Award, and has been nominated for four Dora Mavor Moore Awards. He is a graduate of the National Theatre School of Canada and currently lives in Toronto.